

CHAPTER 7 – COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

7.1 COMMUNITY SURVEY

7.1.1 Survey Methodology

Staff from the Town of Vinton and Roanoke County Planning Departments conducted a community survey of property owners and residents along the study corridors. The target population for the community survey was property owners and residents in the Vinton community, as well as commuters traveling along the study corridors. For this reason, the survey was open and unrestricted to respondents.

Over 650 property owners and residents of parcels fronting the study corridors were informed of the community survey through the first community meeting invitation mailed in early January 2009. Over 250 surveys were distributed throughout the Vinton community at venues such as the Vinton Municipal Building, the Vinton Library, local restaurants, recreational facilities, banks and laundromats. Additional public outreach efforts included advertising the community survey through a Roanoke County news release, a message on Roanoke Valley Television (RVTV Channel 3) and a blog on *Twitter*.

Taking advantage of the cost saving techniques available with the Internet, planning staff from Vinton and Roanoke County encouraged the public to complete the survey online. For citizens preferring to submit paper surveys, hard copies of the four-page survey (found in Appendix B) were made available at the January community meeting, at the Vinton and Roanoke County planning departments, the Vinton Library, and various businesses in the Vinton area. Staff also provided citizens with the opportunity to request the survey by U.S. mail. Among the benefits of this mixed-mode strategy of survey distribution, were providing survey respondents with alternative survey modes, the time and cost savings associated with eliminating the printing and mailing of surveys, as well as the time and cost savings of having returned survey data already in an electronic format.

The survey consisted of multiple choice, short-answer and open-ended questions. The questions addressed topics such as demographics, community likes and dislikes, bicycle and pedestrian amenities, streetscape features, transportation issues, resource preservation, community

facilities and future development along the study corridors. The following is an analysis of the survey responses, which were collected through February 28, 2009.

Of the 652 surveys mailed, 130 were returned, yielding a 20% response rate. Of the surveys received, 112 were submitted online (86%) and 18 were received by mail (14%). An additional 250 surveys were distributed throughout the Vinton community, which drops the response rate to 14%. As the survey was open to the public at large, an accurate response rate is of little predictive value.

7.1.2 Getting to Know You

Five demographics questions, intended to understand the composition of the population responding to the survey, were included in the survey. The first five questions related to gender, age, relationship to study corridors, length of time living or working along study corridors and the frequency in which the respondents traveled the study corridors. All survey responses were anonymous unless the respondent chose to disclose information pertaining to their identity.

7.1.2.1 Gender

The survey results demonstrate that there was a slight variation among male and female respondents. More than half of the respondents were males (53%). Females represented forty-four (44%) percent of respondents. The remaining three (3%) percent of respondents chose not to answer the question or reveal their gender.

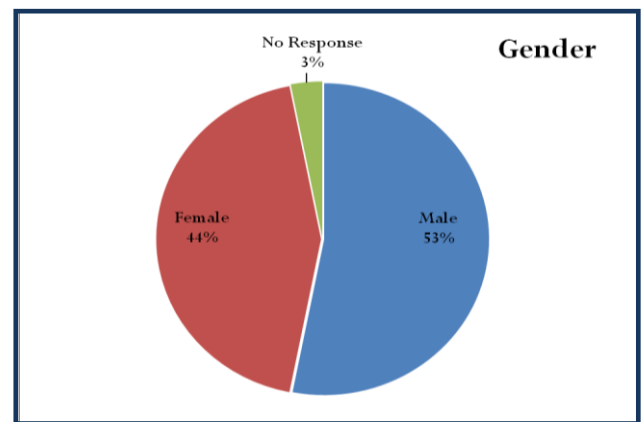


Figure 7.1.2.1 Gender distribution among respondents.

7.1.2.2 Age

The age of respondents varied considerably in the survey results. Forty-two percent (42%) of respondents were between the ages of 35-49. Twenty-six percent (26%) of respondents were between the ages of 50-64. Twelve percent (12%) of the respondents fell within the 65 and older category, and ten percent (10%) of respondents were between the ages of 25-34. The respondents in the “no response” and “18-24” categories were evenly distributed with each category receiving five percent (5%) of survey respondents. No surveys were returned for respondents under the age of 18.

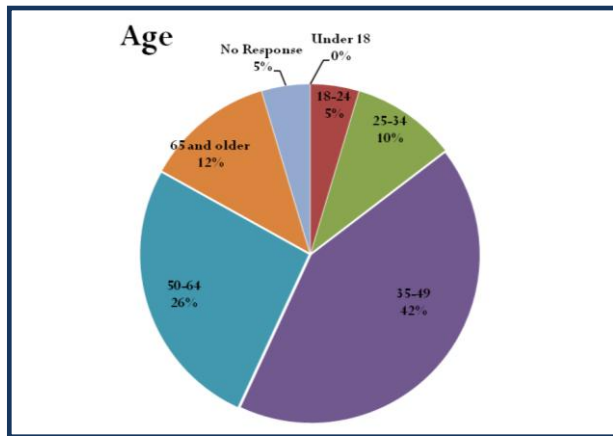


Image 7.1.2.2 Age distribution among survey respondents.

7.1.2.3 Connection to Study Corridors

Almost two-thirds (64%) of survey respondents indicated that they lived and/or worked along the study corridors. The second highest category of responses was respondents who primarily drive along the study corridors (commuters) to reach a destination at 30%. Staff assumed

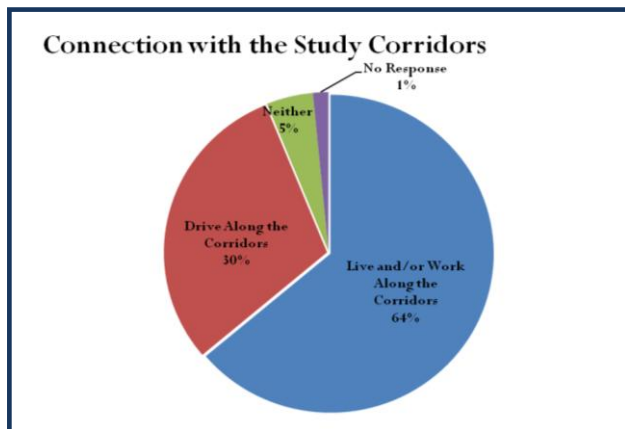


Image 7.1.2.3 Respondents connection with study corridors

that respondents who live and/or work along the study corridors frequently drive the study corridors; therefore, those who drive along the study corridors are categorized as commuters. Five (5%) percent of respondents answered the “neither” category indicating that they are possibly bicyclists or pedestrians who utilize the greenways intersecting the study corridors for recreational purposes. The remaining respondents (1%) chose not to answer the question.

7.1.2.4 Living and Working along the Study Corridors

When asked how long respondents had lived and/or worked along the study corridors, over one-third (36%) of respondents indicated more than 20 years. The second highest response category was between 11-20 years, with twenty-seven percent (27%) of the responses. Eighteen percent (18%) of respondents reported living and/or working along the study corridors between 5-10 years and fourteen percent (14%) reported less than 5 years. The remaining five percent (5%) did not provide a response. This question was useful in identifying issues shared by respondents who had lived and/or worked in Vinton for many years, as well as those new to the community.

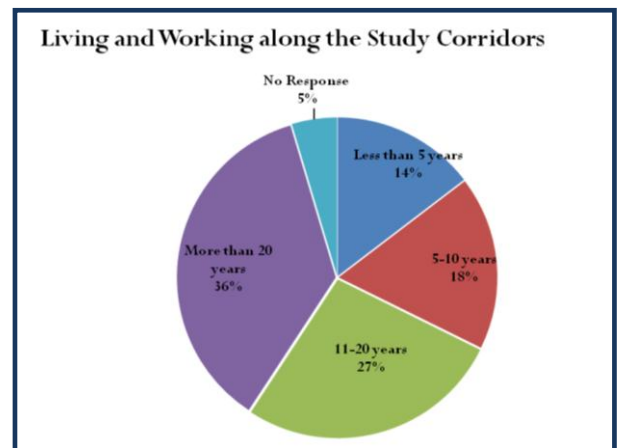


Image 7.1.2.4 Length of time respondents have lived and/or worked along the study corridors.

7.1.2.5 Traveling the Study Corridors

Over two-thirds (67%) of survey respondents indicated that they travel the study corridors on a daily basis. The remaining respondents travel the study corridors in varying intervals. Eleven percent (11%) of respondents indicated traveling the study corridors at a frequency of

two to three times per week, while eight percent (8%) of respondents travel the corridors once a week. Ten percent (10%) of the respondents indicate traveling the study corridors on a monthly basis. Less than three percent (3%) of the respondents travel the study corridors on a yearly basis.

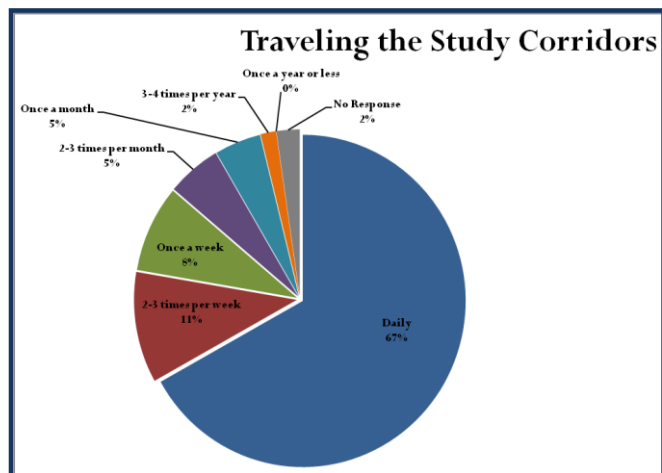


Image 7.1.2.5 Frequency respondents travel the study corridors.

7.1.3 Transportation

7.1.3.1 Modes of Transportation

In order to gauge the primary modes of transportation utilized along the study corridors, respondents were asked to identify the means in which they reach their destinations. Overwhelmingly, respondents answered that the automobile was their primary source of transportation. The use of bicycles ranked second, followed by pedestrians who walk to some of their destinations. Very few respondents indicated using the

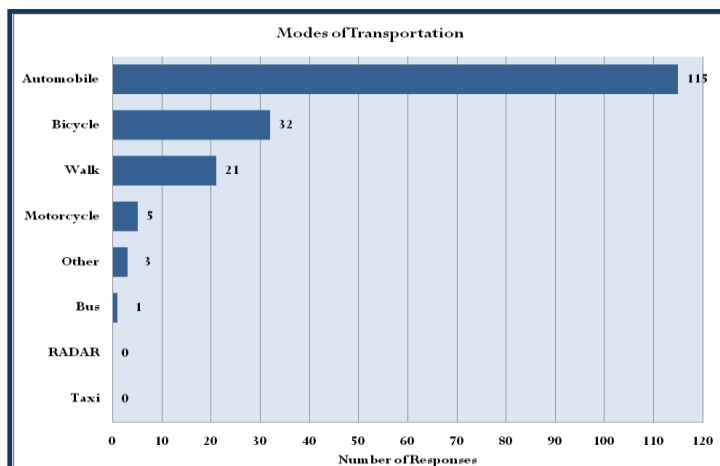


Image 7.1.3.1 Modes of transportation taken by respondents along the study corridors.

Valley Metro bus routes or an alternative mode of transportation not provided as an answer choice. No respondents indicated use of RADAR or a taxi service.

7.1.3.2 Bicycle and Pedestrian Improvements

In anticipating that automobiles would be a high ranking answer on the modes of transportation utilized along the study corridors, staff asked if respondents would consider bicycling or walking to their destinations more often if bicycle and pedestrian improvements were made along the study corridors. Over half (54%) of respondents indicated that they would walk or bike more often if improvements were made along the study corridors. Less than one-third (28%) of respondents answered “no”, improvements would not encourage them to consider bicycling or walking more often. Eighteen percent (18%) of respondents chose not to provide a response.

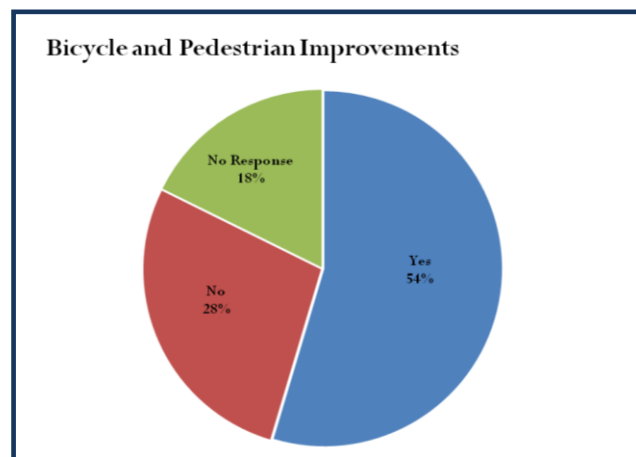


Image 7.1.3.2 Over half of respondents answered “yes” they would consider biking or walking more frequently if improvements were made along the study corridors.

7.1.3.3 Safety Improvements and Streetscape Features

To capture respondents’ opinions on where specific safety improvements are needed along the study corridors, staff formulated a question with a matrix of safety improvements and streetscape features that could be designated by study corridor. As shown in Image 7.1.3.3, bicycle lanes, crosswalks and sidewalks received the highest number of responses. The study corridors receiving the most responses for these three streetscape features were Washington Avenue, Hardy Road and Walnut Avenue, followed closely by Virginia Avenue and Bypass Road.

The highest ranking safety improvements were turning lanes, access points and medians. Washington Avenue, Hardy Road and Virginia Avenue received the highest number of responses for safety improvements needed along the study corridors. A breakdown of responses by study corridor can be found in Appendix B.

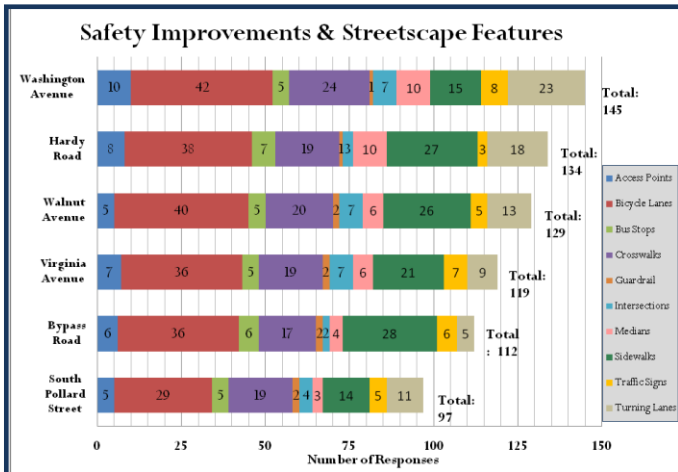


Image 7.1.3.3 Bicycle lanes, crosswalks and sidewalks received the highest number of responses for improvements needed along the study corridors.

7.1.3.4 Traffic Inconveniences

The final question asked about transportation related issues related to inconveniences encountered by respondents while traveling along the study corridors. As with the previous question, a matrix of answer choices was provided allowing the respondent to designate a corresponding study corridor. The answer choices included congestion, delays, excessive speed, heavy truck traffic and signal coordination or timing. The results

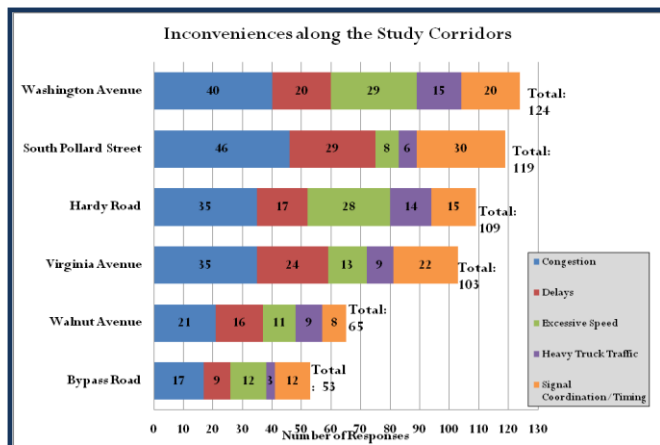


Image 7.1.3.4 Congestion and delays were the highest ranking inconveniences along the study corridors.

indicated that the highest ranking inconvenience encountered by the respondents is congestion along the study corridors, particularly South Pollard Street and Washington Avenue. Delays and signal coordination and timing were the second and third ranking category, followed by excessive speed and heavy truck traffic.

7.1.4 Land Use and Development

7.1.4.1 Businesses and Services

The survey provided respondents with an opportunity to identify businesses and services they would like to see along the study corridors. Respondents were asked to select as many businesses and services as they preferred. Staff provided 16 multiple choice answers, along with an “other” category. The results are shown below in Figure 7.1.4.1. An overwhelming amount of respondents indicated their desire for sit-down family restaurants. The second highest ranking category was retail establishments, followed closely by big box stores. Professional and medical offices rounded out the top five responses.

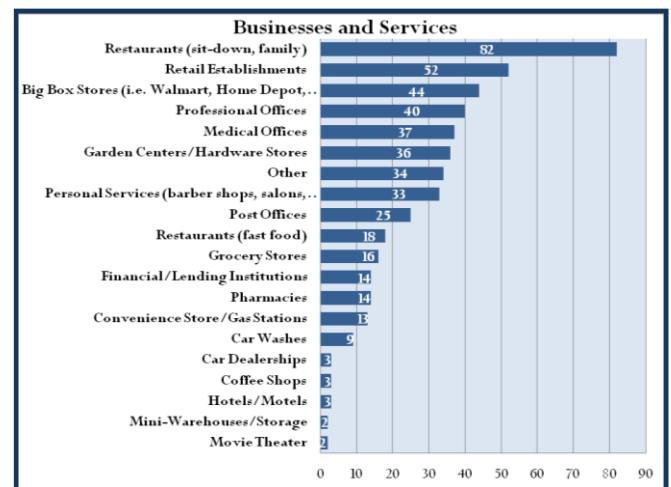


Image 7.1.4.1 Responses indicate a strong desire for sit-down restaurants and retail establishments along the study corridors.

7.1.4.2 Streetscape Amenities

The survey also provided respondents with an opportunity to comment on streetscape amenities they would like to see added to the study corridors. Similar to the transportation related questions, this question was formatted as a matrix with multiple choices answers that correspond to specific corridors. The top five responses included:

1. Underground utilities

2. Street Trees
3. Sidewalks
4. Building Facades
5. Lighting

The full bar graphs showing all of the answers by study corridor is provided in Appendix B.

7.1.5 Resource Preservation

7.1.5.1 Community Facilities

The survey offered respondents an opportunity to provide input on improvements needed to community facilities and/or services within the Vinton community. Respondents were given multiple choice answers with the ability to supply open responses. There was also an “other” category. In analyzing the responses, staff noticed that 65 respondents chose to skip this question which could possibly be indicative of satisfaction with community facilities in the Vinton area.

The community facility receiving the highest number of responses was the Vinton Library. In reviewing the open-ended responses, the comments received about the Vinton Library overwhelmingly indicate that residents feel the library needs to be renovated, expanded or relocated. The residents want the library to remain in Vinton, but feel it is crowded and outdated. A few residents mentioned moving the library to Downtown Vinton.

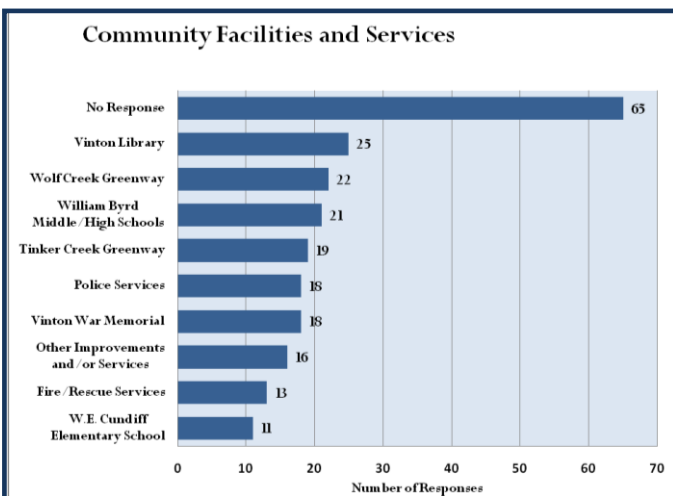


Image 7.1.5.1 The Vinton Library received the highest number of responses for improvements need to community facilities.

In regards to customer service at the library, residents were pleased with the "great staff" and "outstanding job" performance. Other suggestions included adding a drop-

off box, adding more computers, updating technology, additional parking, bicycle racks, and the need for more community meeting space. A few comments were received about aesthetically sprucing up the building by trimming trees, adding landscaping and taking measures to make the building more noticeable.

The Wolf Creek and Tinker Creek Greenways received many comments regarding the need to connect the two trail systems into the Roanoke River Greenway, as well as adding more benches and trash receptacles along the paths.

The third highest number of responses was received about the William Byrd Middle and High Schools. The majority of the comments indicated that the schools are overcrowded and in need of expansion. During the time of this study, construction commenced on the expansion and renovation of the high school.

Several responses were received about respondents' satisfaction with police, fire and rescue services. Comments were received regarding concerns about the need for opticom lights in all directions on the stop lights to help facilitate the movement of emergency vehicles along the study corridors.

7.1.5.2 Cultural, Environmental or Historical Resources

The final question on the survey asked respondents to comment on the cultural, environmental and historical resources along the study corridors. Numerous comments were received about drainage concerns and trash and debris accumulation along Hardy Road. Many respondents expressed comments about preserving the small town, quaint feeling of the Town of Vinton. Other comments suggested doing more to preserve historic structures in the Vinton area. For a list of more detailed comments, refer to Appendix B.

7.2 BUSINESS OWNER INTERVIEWS

The business owner/employee surveys that were conducted by staff focused on four main subject areas: Transportation, Streetscape Improvements/Aesthetics, Development, and “Your Community.”

A range of responses was based primarily on the location of the business. Most of the businesses located in the main downtown area off of South Pollard Street had feedback, suggestions, and an overall interest in the corridor study.

In general, these business owners did not hesitate to be interviewed and most of them were familiar with the plan/had attended the community meeting, and had completed the online survey. However, the businesses in the outlying areas such as the entrance corridor along Hardy Road and the stretch of Walnut Avenue ending at Southern States were not interested in the corridor plan and had little feedback or participation in the interview process. Most of these businesses were not interested in offering suggestions and several refused surveys.

7.2.1 Downtown Business Owner Interviews

For Downtown business owners, the transportation issues focused primarily on the poor flow of traffic through the downtown area, specifically late in the afternoon. Most owners felt that the post office was the main source of traffic problems in this area and that relocating the post office to a larger space with more adequate parking may be a remedy to downtown traffic concerns. Businesses were also concerned with the speed of traffic through the downtown which makes on-street parking dangerous and difficult. It was repeated many times that the parking downtown is inadequate.

In the area of Streetscape Improvements and Aesthetics, most downtown business owners would like to see benches, plants, and façade improvements. However, the interviewees overwhelmingly stated that aesthetics and streetscape improvements are not primary concerns for them, whereas lack of business and foot traffic are more pressing issues.

In the Development portion of the survey, most business owners would like to see more retail businesses downtown. They would also like to see amenities such as a movie theater and recreation options for the young people in the area. Although it is not in the downtown area, nearly every interview participant said they would like to see a new business in the vacant Rite Aid building. The business owners also said they would like to see more promotion/assistance from the town for small businesses.

The Your Community interview results were mostly positive. Most downtown business owners live in the town and think Vinton is a wonderful community with great potential.

7.2.2 Hardy Road/Bypass Road Business Owner Interviews

For business owners along Hardy and Bypass Road, the transportation issues focused primarily on the amount and flow of traffic on these corridors. The concerns were that the traffic has increased substantially in the last years, with several specific mentions of residents of the Smith Mountain Lake area greatly contributing to the congestion. The flow of traffic is slowed to a crawl in the morning due to the work and school traffic as well as in the evening due to these same commuters returning home from their places of employment.

In addition to these two issues, other concerns included the speed of the traffic travelling down the corridor, the hills in several areas which obscure sight distances, and the timing of traffic lights – all which make entering and exiting the roads treacherous.

In the area of Streetscape Improvements and Aesthetics, the interviewees overwhelmingly mentioned adding crosswalks to several locations in all the corridor study areas. There was a considerable amount of concern for the elderly population's pedestrian safety when navigating the corridors.

In regards to the Development segment of the survey, the overwhelming majority of business respondents requested a larger "sit-down" restaurant as a business that would be most needed in the area. There were various opinions as to the actual specifics of the type, as input included additional fast food restaurants, affordable family style restaurants or a larger chain restaurant.

Several respondents mentioned the need for more recreational facilities with programs for children and entertainment facilities for children and families alike. Large retail stores and coffee shops were mentioned as well as a fair amount of input that stated things in the Town and the Vinton area of Roanoke County were just fine as they are now.

In the area of the community as a whole, most respondents commented that they really had no comments for any changes that needed to be made and liked the area as it was. The few that made comments had concerns about the increasing number of vacant buildings in the area and plans for the use of these buildings in the future.

7.2.3 Washington Avenue Business Owner Interviews

Traffic volume during peak hours and the congestion of existing traffic patterns were the highest concerns of

business owners along Washington Avenue. Many businesses located within the Town of Vinton commented on the need for turning lanes. They felt, at most, a middle turning lane would reduce the number of accidents on Washington Avenue. In addition, many businesses located near Bypass Road had concerns with the overall traffic configuration. Many comments centered on accessibility to the businesses located near Bypass Road. Businesses located within Roanoke County generally had two major concerns: the closing of the cross-over located near Domino's Pizza, and the traffic congestion and speeding created from the William Byrd Middle and High Schools. Many business owners and employees would like to see the cross-over near Domino's Pizza reinstalled.

There were not many Streetscape Improvement comments. Many business owners and employees felt there were more important issues facing the Town of Vinton and Roanoke County but agreed some aesthetic changes would be "nice". Others felt that sidewalks, improved lighting, and improved signage would be beneficial for safety reasons only.

In regards to the Development portion of the survey, business owners and employees were much more outspoken. "Sit down" and fast food restaurants were the most common response. They would also like to see more activities or businesses geared toward children and young adults in the area. Some businesses commented on the vacant Rite Aid building located on Hardy Road and vacant buildings in general located in the downtown portion of the Town of Vinton. In addition, comments varied from "more professional businesses" to "specialty women clothing stores." Business owners also commented on types of businesses they felt there were too many of in the Vinton study area.

In the area of Your Community, many business owners commented on better coordination between Town of Vinton Police and Roanoke County Police. Overall, many of the comments were positive; however, some business owners had negative general comments in regards to the Town of Vinton and Roanoke County Community Development Departments as a whole.

7.3 VINTON AREA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

The Vinton Area Chamber of Commerce serves as a liaison between businesses, residents, organizations, and

governmental entities in the Vinton area. The Vinton Area Chamber of Commerce was formed to provide a more focused representation of area business interests. Staff made a presentation regarding this plan to the Vinton Area Chamber of Commerce to encourage business owners and residents to attend and provide comments at the community meetings.

The Vinton Area Chamber of Commerce and the Roanoke County Department of Economic Development assisted in the inventory of vacant and available parcels along the study corridors. For the results of this inventory, refer to Appendix A.

7.4 COMMUNITY MEETINGS

7.4.1 January Community Meeting

The first community meeting was held on Thursday, January 29, 2009 in the North Ballroom of the Vinton War Memorial. Over 650 notices were mailed to property owners, residents and tenants along the study corridors with information regarding the community meeting. For the convenience of residents and business owners, two open house style meetings were held at different times throughout the day. Approximately fifty (50) citizens were in attendance between the two sessions.



Image 7.4.1 The first community meeting was held on January 29, 2009 at the Vinton War Memorial.

The community meeting sessions were facilitated by staff from Roanoke County, the Town of Vinton and the Roanoke Valley Alleghany Regional Commission (RVARC). Several maps were displayed at various stations throughout the room, including aesthetics, land

use and development, transportation and infrastructure. Flipcharts were set up along with information material at each station so citizens could leave comments and questions. For a summary of the comments received at the community meeting, refer to Appendix B.

7.4.2 June Community Meeting

The second community meeting was held on Thursday, June 18, 2009 in the South Ballroom of the Vinton War Memorial. As with the January community meeting, over 650 notices were mailed to property owners, residents and tenants, as well as attendees from the first community meeting. Approximately 15 people attended the meeting. The community meeting consisted of an open house held at 6:30 p.m. followed by a formal presentation from Roanoke County staff at 7:00 p.m.



Image 7.4.2 Mayor Brad Grose provides opening remarks at the second community meeting.

At this meeting, staff presented a summary of the comments received at the January community meeting, results of the community survey, an overview of the business owner interviews, draft goals and recommendations, and three proposed Future Land Use scenarios. The meeting was concluded with a question and answer session, as well as an overview of the next steps following the community meeting. Questions and concerns raised at the meeting included funding mechanisms for proposed recommendations, timelines for the implementation schedule, transportation related topics and coordination of the future land use amendments along Hardy Road with the proposed VDOT road widening project.

In addition to the community meetings, business owner interviews and community survey, staff from Roanoke County and the Town of Vinton conducted stakeholder interviews with several intergovernmental agencies, including VDOT, the Vinton Public Works Department, the Blue Ridge Parkway and representatives from the Roanoke County and Vinton fire and rescue departments. The focus of these interviews was to examine current conditions along the study corridors, identify issues of concern, discuss future projects and their effects on the study corridors, and solicit input from these stakeholders on recommendations along the study corridors.

The first stakeholder meeting was held on January 23, 2009, focusing on transportation and safety issues along the study corridors. Staff from VDOT, the Town of Vinton and Roanoke County attended this meeting. On March 20, 2009, staff from VDOT, the Vinton Public Works Department, Roanoke County, the Town of Vinton and RVARC conducted a field study of the study corridors and discussed proposed road improvement projects. As a result of these stakeholder meetings, VDOT is now coordinating with the Vinton Public Works Department to rescope the Walnut Avenue Six-Year Improvement Plan Project and determine an amended phasing schedule.

The second stakeholder meeting, held on April 10, 2009, was hosted by the Town of Vinton and included the Roanoke County Fire Marshal, paid and volunteer staff from the Vinton Fire and Rescue Departments, Economic Development staff and the Vinton Public Works Director and Assistant Director. The main purpose of the meeting was to discuss the state of existing water and sewer infrastructure along the study corridors and discuss its capability of supporting future development and redevelopment. The second portion of the meeting was devoted to safety along the study corridors. Staff discussed the potential for additional bicycle and pedestrian accommodations along the study corridors and impacts this would cause to fire and rescue personnel.

The third stakeholder meeting was held with representatives from the National Park Service and the Blue Ridge Parkway. The purpose of this meeting was to discuss viewshed preservation, land use and development adjacent to the Blue Ridge Parkway, future projects along the Blue Ridge Parkway and greenway connections.

7.5 STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS